Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

POVERTY BAROMETER

March 2002

MARCH IS NUTRITION MONTH:

Can Manitoban Families Get the Food their Children Need?

Children are a precious resource, and they need calories, nutrients, and a variety of nutritious foods for healthy development. March is Nutrition Month in Canada, so it's time to ask ourselves: Do children across Manitoba have access to affordable and nutritious foods? Can low-income families afford the food their children need?

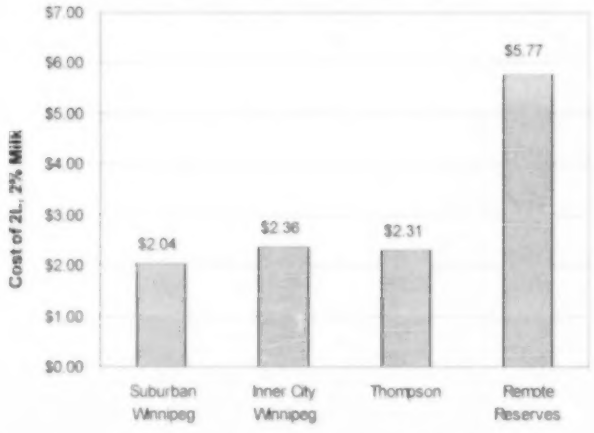
Photo credit: Andrew Stawick

Food Costs in Manitoban Communities

Let's look at how much it actually costs for families to meet their most basic nutritional needs, and how these costs can vary from region to region in Manitoba.

Milk is a major component of a child's healthy diet, but for many families in our province it's also an unaffordable luxury. The following chart shows the difference in the average cost for two litres of 2% milk in four different areas of Manitoba.

Milk Costs in Manitoba



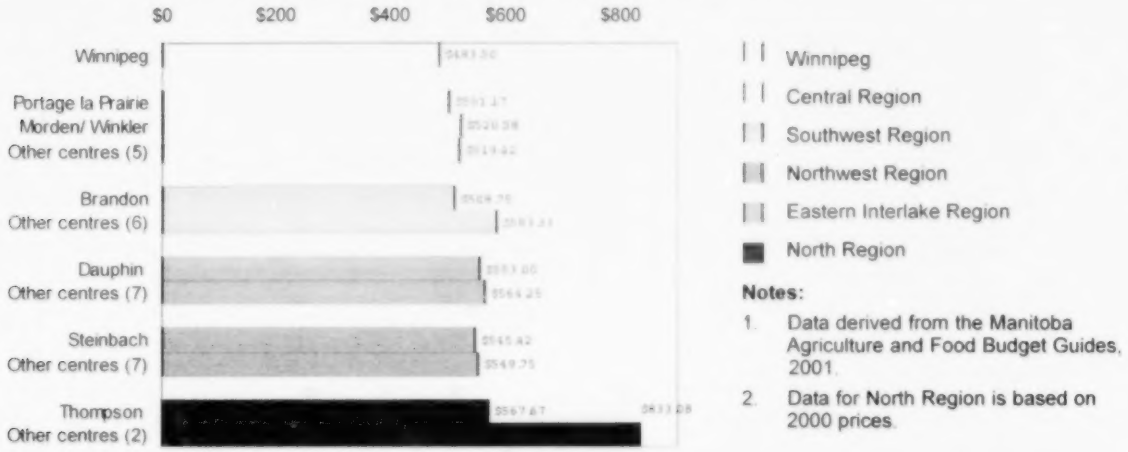
Note: Data provided by the Manitoba Nutrition and Food Security Network.

Depending on where you live in the province, the price of nutritious food can be so high that families are forced to buy cheaper, usually less healthy items. This is especially true for low-income families.

In its March 14, 2002 issue, the Winnipeg Free Press quoted a former northern resident, who said:

"If you have the choice between a four-litre jug of milk for $12 and a package of Kool-Aid for $2, which are you going to choose?"

Monthly Nutritional Food Costs Across Manitoba



Notes:

1. Data derived from the Manitoba Agriculture and Food Budget Guides, 2001.
2. Data for North Region is based on 2000 prices.

Manitoba Agriculture and Food[1] have collected information on the cost of common nutritious foods for a family of four[2], depending on where in the province they live. Their findings, charted above, show great differences in food costs by location; the same nutritious foods cost families 17% more in Thompson than in Winnipeg.

Can Low Income Families Afford Healthy Food?

It's hard for many low-income families to afford the foods necessary for a healthy diet. Let's compare a typical monthly food bill for a family of four with their income. At Manitoba's minimum wage of $6.50 per hour, a person working a 40-hour week would earn $1040.00 (before deductions and not including benefits). If this family lives in Winnipeg, we can see from the table that they would have to spend $483.50 for nutritional foods, leaving only $556.50 to cover all of their other costs.

But a family also needs shelter. In Winnipeg, the average rent for a three-bedroom apartment is $777.00[3]. So, to afford just the essentials of shelter and food, our family is already short $220.50.

The situation is similar for many families receiving employment and income assistance. Just to make ends meet, families are forced to choose between paying the rent and feeding their children. No parent should have to make this choice!

What Needs to be Done?

The Manitoba government, through programs like *Healthy Child*, is helping to improve the health and well-being of Manitoba's children. But these measures don't go far enough. The Manitoba government should also:

1. Increase social assistance payments in-step with annual increases in the cost of living (Consumer Price Index),
2. Increase the minimum wage to 60% of the average industrial wage rate, and
3. Eliminate the clawback on the National Child Benefit Supplement to families on social assisstance with children over the age of six.

Footnotes:

1. Manitoba Agriculture and Food Budget Guides, 2001.
2. Defined here as a man and woman aged 25-49, with a boy aged 7-9 and a girl aged 13-15.
3. Manitoba Agriculture and Food Budget Guides, 2001.

POVERTY BAROMETER is an occasional publication of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

The mission of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg is to provide action-oriented leadership in social planning and effecting social policy changes.

Visit the Council at 412 McDermot Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3A 0A9, or our website at www.spcw.mb.ca. Our phone number is (204) 943-2561, or fax us at (204) 942-3221.